

Luke 8:26-39

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" -- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Our passage from Isaiah (see below) has some keys to understanding our gospel story of the afflicted man of Geresene, "I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks; who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels." Note the Geresene people are likely complicit.

This story really bothers a lot of Biblical scholars, and most of the theologians' theories are, frankly, unconvincing. There are a number of subtleties, and some troubling issues in this parable that are unique to the Bible: Jesus negotiating with demons, the sacrifice of the pigs, the villagers rejection contrasted with the recovered man's adoration of Jesus, among others.

I believe that the stories in the Bible are synergistic - like a beautiful necklace, these stories should be interconnected for additional meaning. So **before** this passage, Jesus and his disciples had set sail in a boat and Jesus commands the winds and the waves, and it ends with "They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?' " As usual, his disciples are clueless as to who Jesus really is, while the demons knew exactly who was in that boat, and I believe that those demons summoned up a storm to oppose Jesus. Jesus of course immediately calmed the storm.

Thomas Aquinas and Catholic Church believed that demons could cause natural phenomena, including storms, winds, and even "rain of fire," a concept considered a "dogma of faith" in the Catholic Church as early as 700 A.D. **This changes everything.** This is Jesus going straight across the sea from Capernaum to the gentile side hunting demons; neutralizing the worst storm that 2,000 demons could sling.

Jesus wins and then removes all the demons; thus successful he comes straight home. Perhaps Jesus is testing his ability to destroy 2,000 demons all at once.

I like Matthew Henry's notion that the storm was part of an effort by the dark forces to keep Jesus from this confrontation, and that this confrontation was Jesus' goal, to face the worst that they could offer. "These **malignant** spirits ... finding they could not prevent our Savior's coming by the storm they had raised, sent for recruits, intending this to be a decisive battle, and hoping now to be too hard for him that had cast out so many unclean spirits, and to give him a defeat. They either were, or at least would be thought to be, a legion, formidable as an army with banners."

"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"

And these massed unclean spirits could apparently resist somewhat, and Jesus (for his own reasons) negotiated with them. What were they negotiating? This legion did not want to be disembodied – they had to have **a body to torment**, like a parasite to a host – otherwise they would have to return to where they belonged.

I would **love** to have Jesus with me for my next contract negotiation, as Jesus was **immensely clever**. I believe that these spirits begged Jesus to put them into the pigs so that they could subsequently return to infect other humans, but Jesus knew what would **really happen**, or what **he could make happen**. Thousands of pigs suddenly inhabited and terrified by gross unholy spirits caused a pig mob panic, went the wrong way, and like lemmings, fell off a cliff to their death. Jesus had sent all two thousand demons back to their infernal home. That makes sense to me since in the next passage he gives his disciples power over all remaining spirits. Another indication of a huge win by Jesus.

I, of course, would like to know why this happened. Why did Jesus make a business trip over to the other side (in so many ways), dooming a legion of demons, and returning home triumphant?

A more important question is how does this apply to us today? Here I quote my favorite Lutheran minister, Brian Stoffregen: "The story of the Gerasene demoniac should now be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior. They will understand what would lead a person to say that his name is [legion] ... Can this be a story -- actually, an event -- where non-selves can actually find their selves? Where they stop being what others want them to be and become the unique person God has created them to be? A phrase from family systems theory that has resonated with some counselees is that a "self, is more attractive than a non-self." The whole country including Gerasenes had chosen self at any cost. They were happy enough with their demons, and were very unhappy to have lost their whipping boy.

So the guy is more than cured, he is made whole, and the crowd is seized with great fear as a result, not unlike the disciples in the boat. The second greater fear was when the pigs died; they realized that Jesus could cure all of them, and the whole countryside demanded that Jesus leave right away. **What's that about?** The easy answer is that Jesus disrupted the status quo and their minds were blown. Or could it be that the Gerasene people are not praising God that a man is healed; rather they are counting the cost in pigs, and found it too much. Or perhaps they are terrified that they too will be made whole.

Some commentators think that this community was essentially keeping this man in his condition. Some said he was the repository of all their sins/demons. I do not agree with that but I can see that a congregation could have this condition.

Walter Wink's thoughts on the relevance of these connections to the congregation and church were very helpful, "Something powerful and beyond your experience or imagination, however good, can be terrifying. What will Jesus do next in our community?

What if he makes us all different? The good thing about a rut is that you know where you're going. Once out of the rut you don't exactly know where to go. **That's frightening, when you do not trust in God.** Why is it that we want everything to get better, but nothing to change? Doesn't this describe life in too many congregations?" Frankly, when traveling I have to be very careful about choosing an Episcopal church to attend - I have been outraged by unwelcoming cubbishness several times.

Rev. George Hermanson adds this: "The Christian congregation must always be aware of its ultimate meaning, which is beyond itself. The social, cultural or ceremonial form of the group must never become something to be preserved, or above all, something to be possessed. **Our tendency is to opt for the static security of an established order**, what we know and what we feel safe with. We go into decline because we have opted to evade the only real security there is - the rock of Christ, the dynamic activity of God, the glorious liberty of being a child of God." I love how we **actively share** our growing joyous liberty, in each and everything we are doing here at Saint Francis.

Our beloved friends in AA and NA know very well the power of such demons. Their meetings are filled with passionate prayer to God for deliverance. For the healing of our demons today, the fellowship of family, congregation and community is **key** to our restoration. Becoming free from our demons is not a "do-it-yourself" project. **We need help. We need God's help, and we need the help of other people. Just as we must most assuredly help others in need.**

Rev. Wink made his discovery in South America in the embattled 60s with repression and death squads throughout that continent. He tells us how we can get out of our rut: open your eyes, be receptive to each other, get smart - and what both Wink and I believe most important - **make yourself whole.**

Let us pray: Dear lord God, please continue to empower us in our many sacred ministries, of all sorts, large and small, special and humble, known and unknown. I know that you will bless us for each and every one. And please re-affirm in our hearts that all of us, of all kinds and genders, friends and strangers, are your beloved children. **Pray** that we see your

face in everyone we meet. **You once told us**, that what we do for the least of us, is what we do for you. Amen

The Scriptures

The Collect

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your loving-kindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Isaiah 65:1-9

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here I am, here I am,"
to a nation that did not call on my name.
I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;
a people who provoke me
to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens
and offering incense on bricks;
who sit inside tombs,
and spend the night in secret places;
who eat swine's flesh,
with broth of abominable things in their vessels;
who say, "Keep to yourself,
do not come near me, for I am too holy for you."
These are a smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that burns all day long.
See, it is written before me:
I will not keep silent, but I will repay;
I will indeed repay into their laps
their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together,
says the Lord;
because they offered incense on the mountains
and reviled me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
full payment for their actions.
Thus says the Lord:
As the wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, "Do not destroy it,
for there is a blessing in it,"
so I will do for my servants' sake,
and not destroy them all.
I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;

my chosen shall inherit it,
and my servants shall settle there.

The Psalm

Psalm 22:18-27

Deus, Deus meus

18 Be not far away, O Lord; *
you are my strength; hasten to help me.
19 Save me from the sword, *
my life from the power of the dog.
20 Save me from the lion's mouth, *
my wretched body from the horns of wild bulls.
21 I will declare your Name to my brethren; *
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.
22 Praise the Lord, you that fear him; *
stand in awe of him, O offspring of Israel;
all you of Jacob's line, give glory.
23 For he does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty;
neither does he hide his face from them; *
but when they cry to him he hears them.
24 My praise is of him in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him.
25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the Lord shall praise him: *
"May your heart live for ever!"
26 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, *
and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.
27 For kingship belongs to the Lord; *
he rules over the nations.

The Epistle

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise

On the cutting room floor

David Lose: if you are willing to risk it this week, the Gospel reading in front of us invites us to take up one of them. I say "risk" because anytime you tackle one of the great themes not just of literature or preaching but of life, you will cause a stir, touching a place deep in your hearers and setting off a chain of reactions that you cannot control. So while I think it's definitely worth the risk, if you're going to preach this message you might want to clear a little more time than usual in your calendar in the week after your sermon for pastoral conversations. □

I believe there is a deeper meaning to this story. That the real demons are like those mentioned in the quote above - largely self-created and within us. And according to Walter Wink, the Episcopal priest who wrote ***The Powers That Be***, it is the frequently innocent interlinking of our social institutions, from Boy Scouts to Hell's Angels, from Rotary to extreme politics, from knitting societies to bar societies - he sees this interlinking as the ultimate rut. Add to this our own weaknesses, my addiction to any 49ers news, irrational fears, unsociable concepts, neuroses and psychoses.